

Derek Ferguson ... Rangers starlet



Talented midfielder Derek Ferguson was just 15-years-old when he made his first-team debut for Rangers against Swansea City in the Tom Forsyth Testimonial match at Ibrox. His first competitive start arrived at the beginning of the following season, 1983/84, when Fergie came on as a substitute against Queen of the South in a Scottish League Cup tie, and his European debut was just three weeks away – home and away ties against Valetta – in the European Cup Winners Cup.

But the impressionable teenager could've been forgiven for thinking he had signed up for some sort of footballing circus as the Light Blues scored an astonishing 28 goals in the four matches, and although the gifted youngster failed to get his name on the scoresheet, he certainly made the right impression on his manager, the legendary John Greig.

Mind you, Ferguson would never actually become known for his prowess in front of goal – although his talent in the middle of the park was never in question.

He said: "John Greig signed me for Rangers when I was 16, but he had actually been coaching me since just before my teens. Back then, it was a schoolboy form you were recruited on, which you signed at 12, and that covered you for about four years. About six months before your 16th birthday, the club made a decision as to whether or not they were going to take you on full time, and fortunately for me John Greig was the manager of Rangers at that time so I landed my first professional contract.

“John also gave me my debut, so he was a massive influence on me. And he remained a huge influence even when he left the manager’s job, because when I got into one or two scrapes – while Graeme Souness was the gaffer – John was always about the place, and he always had time for me, so he was someone I definitely looked up to. He is obviously a Rangers legend, but if you can look past that, he is also a lovely guy.

“But he was one of my first coaches, which I suppose is unimaginable in this day and age. Mind you, I was also taken for coaching sessions by the likes of Tommy McLean and Alex Miller, so I was very fortunate. It was amazing for a young lad to be working with guys like them, but it was something I appreciated.

“But John Greig ticked all the boxes. He was as hard as nails but he could also play the game, a bit like Ian Ferguson. A lot of people only remember Fergie’s tackling and aggression, but he was far more than that, he was a terrific football player. I played with him and against him and he was top drawer.”

Ferguson reckons the team-building efforts of managers such as Greig and Jock Wallace may have suffered because of the construction of a new stadium – although he insisted it was music to the ears of the up-and-coming youngsters of his era at Ibrox.

He explained: “If you look back at 1986, I think a lot of money had been spent on the refurbishment of the stadium, which was fantastic, but it meant there wasn’t an awful lot of cash left to bring in top players, and I think that’s where the likes of myself and quite a few others benefitted.

“Some of the younger players on the staff – including Ian Durrant, Hugh Burns, Robert Fleck and Davie McFarlane – were fortunate to get an opportunity to play in the first team because there wasn’t a lot of money swirling about. If that money had been available we might not have been given the same chance.

“If you even fast forward three or four years, when Graeme Souness was there, that certainly wouldn’t have happened, because if you look at the team by then it was full of top international players. Sometimes, though, that’s what it’s like in football. You’re in the right place at the right time and you get that wee bit of luck that we certainly got and I think that’s important.”

But changes were afoot, and Fergie reckons the appointment of David Holmes as chief executive was a defining moment in the modern day history of Rangers Football Club.

He said: “David Holmes was fantastic for Rangers. He was also such a lovely man, a top guy. Throughout my career I played with 15 different clubs and if we’re talking chairmen, none were nicer than David, and he always had time for you. Some chairmen were perhaps too busy to stop and have a conversation but David would always stop and have a wee chat with you, ask

how you were, ask about your family. That's the type of guy he was. Sometimes in football you don't get guys who will give you time of day, and that's why I mentioned John Greig, who would always have time for a cup of tea and a chat, and I think that's really important. Players really appreciate little things like that. Good people skills are so important."

And one of David Holmes's first major tasks was to find a manager who could transform the club on the field – just like he was doing off it. But Ferguson recalls the day he discovered Graeme Souness was the new player/manager of Rangers – the club he played for!

He said: "When Graeme Souness arrived at Rangers, I found out just like everyone else. It was all over the TV and papers, and I'll tell you something, I was so excited about the appointment. I loved him as a player – he was one of the best. In fact, he was one of the top midfielders in Europe so to find out he was coming to my club, Glasgow Rangers, and that he was going to be my manager, was unbelievable. I was as high as a kite.

"It's hard to imagine, but here was a guy of his calibre coming to Ibrox, and it wasn't just that he was going to be my manager, he was also going to be playing as well – perhaps alongside me. It was a brilliant moment for Rangers – and a teenage Derek Ferguson!

"I think Graeme had done his homework before he came into the club and knew that myself and Ian (Durrant) were decent players, and perhaps he came to Ibrox with the vision that Ian and I would be the mainstay of his midfield for a long time to come, but mistakes were made on my part. "Mind you, when you're young and playing for the team you supported, the club you loved, and earning okay money, I was having the time of my life although maybe enjoying my life a wee bit too much. But I can now look back on those days with a different perspective on life."

But Ferguson reckons mistakes were made on both sides, and said: "Perhaps Graeme's man-management skills could have been a wee bit better. I think if he looks back and reflects on when he was 18 or 19, and what he was like as a person, then it might all have been different, but he did what he thought was right for Rangers at the time.

"He might have thought a lot of me at the start, but he did try to change me a wee bit, in terms of the way I played the game, and it didn't go down too well with me at times. But again it's like everything else, it would have been far better managed with the benefit of hindsight.

"When you get a wee bit older and wiser you look back and think, 'I realise why he was doing that,' but it has to be the same with Graeme. I reckon he might look back and think he could have dealt with me a bit better, but I suppose it was a learning curve for both of us.

"When Graeme made his mind up about something he wouldn't change it. He was hard but you have to respect that. When you're at a huge club like

Rangers then you have to respect what the manager is doing. He felt he was right, but it's about managing it and making the right decisions. I found out the hard way, but I wasn't alone. He thought it was the right way to do things and maybe that's the way he had been treated, but things have changed and even the way you handle football players is so different nowadays."

Ferguson, who would go on to play for Scotland, reckons he was like a wee boy in a sweet shop when Souness was appointed, and he insisted the former Liverpool midfield lynchpin lived up to expectations, and some.

He said: "I was so excited when Graeme came in and his appointment was definitely everything I had hoped for. The first time he walked into the dressing room he was magnificent. Mind you, he didn't so much as walk in, he strutted in, but he was brilliant. Even the way he took training, it was all so professional. He changed loads of things, but mostly just small things, like making us wear flip-flops, and having Jacuzzis and saunas installed.

"And whereas we had previously worn suits from Slater's the Glasgow tailor, that soon changed to Armani, which made us all feel that bit more professional. But we had always enjoyed that tradition at Rangers where we were smart all the time. Even as a 12-year-old I would turn up for training in a shirt and tie!

"But training under Graeme surprised me a bit. It was very good, but it was also quite relaxed and not as intense as I thought it might be. I think it was a lot of stuff he enjoyed, and that he had brought over from Italy."

Having initially played under John Greig, and then Jock Wallace, during the big man's second spell at the club, Ferguson realised there was a need for change, as the club he had grown up supporting was in grave danger of falling even further behind in the Scottish Premier Division pecking order. The New Firm of Aberdeen and Dundee United were fully established, while old rivals Celtic, as well as Hearts, had all made rapid headway and laid genuine claims on the title. Suddenly, Rangers were left playing catch-up. Ferguson said: "When the changes at Ibrox eventually happened in 1986, they really were necessary. I grew up a Rangers fan, and supported the club all my days, whether that was going to the games with my dad or my mates. Rangers was everything, and Graeme Souness was the right choice at the right time, and he changed everything. He changed the philosophy at the club because he was a winner and you could see that in absolutely everything he did.

"And then there was Walter Smith. I think it was a really shrewd move by Graeme to bring Walter in as his assistant, as his time at Dundee United meant he knew the Scottish football scene inside out, plus he also knew that Walter was a Rangers man, which was really important. When you look back at some of the players Graeme signed, all these internationals such as Ray Wilkins, Trevor Francis, Terry Butcher etc, Walter was probably his best signing.

"But there was no doubt we needed to change. Guys like David Holmes obviously had a vision for the club and knew exactly the direction they wanted

it to travel in and Graeme Souness was no doubt a big part of that plan. Everything had to be first class, or I don't think he would have signed as manager, but everyone bought into it. Even things like staying in good hotels the night before matches. Everything was planned, right down to what we ate."

Ferguson made 30 appearances for the Light Blues in Souness's first season, and played an integral part in bringing the league title back to Ibrox. And when he clocked-up more than 30 first-team league matches the following season, and started to add goals to his game, his earlier prediction of Ferguson and Durrant becoming the mainstay of the Gers' midfield for many years to come looked set to bear fruit.

But nothing lasts for ever, and season 1989/90 saw him drift so far out of the first-team picture that a move seemed inevitable.

Ferguson said: "When I left in 1990 it was because Graeme had made his mind up that I was leaving. I hadn't been behaving myself properly off the park, and he wasn't very patient with me. I was enjoying myself a bit too much and his patience was wearing thin. He decided three or four months before I actually left that I was going.

"It was a sore one for me, and it took a while for me to leave because I still had another year left on my contract and I wasn't going to budge, but when you're told that you will be training at certain times, and you won't be included in the first-team squad, and you won't even be playing for the reserves, that you'll be sitting on a bench, it made my mind up for me.

"For me, it was a lesson learned the hard way and I try to pass on that experience to the younger guys I coach, because I don't want it to happen to anyone else. Hopefully, most of them take it on board.

"I went on to play for Hearts for three years and absolutely loved my time there. There were a lot of ex-Rangers players at Tynecastle at the time, including the manager Alex MacDonald, and Iain Ferguson, Nicky Walker and Davie Kirkwood, so that transition was quite easy. The only reason I left was because I lost a wee girl just seven weeks after she was born, and my wife and I made the decision to try and get away from everything so we headed down south and I signed for Sunderland.

"After everything that had gone on at Ibrox, I reckon Hearts was probably the perfect fit for me. I had all my ex-colleagues from Rangers, it was a brilliant family club and was only 40-odd miles along the M8, so I enjoyed playing with the Jambos. But whereas the destination of my Rangers' career was out of my hands, my situation at Hearts was my decision to make, although I wish I had stayed there. But when things happen in your private life you make certain decisions and you have to stick by them."

He added: "Looking back, I think the introduction of Souness in 1986 was a good thing not just for Rangers but for the whole of Scottish football, as it

helped raise the standards in this country. As far as Rangers is concerned, I don't think it was just the money that attracted some of the best players in the country to Ibrox. Rangers have always been a massive club, but I'm sure many of the top players came to the club because the manager was Graeme Souness.

"I reckon many of them could've earned a similar wage down south but they bought into Graeme's philosophy that they could be successful in Scotland and win leagues, cups and even trebles. Sometimes it isn't just about cash, but about the aura of the person that wants you, and that's what Graeme Souness had.

"I'm just glad I got to experience what was a fantastic time to be a Rangers player. Perhaps I could have made more of it, but we are all a little wiser with the benefit of hindsight."